

Chicago Tribune, July 16, 2004

Now that Chicago's favorite football coach has taken himself out of consideration for the U.S. Senate, Republicans in Illinois should be thinking in terms of a baseball analogy. It's time to take a look at the kids and start playing for next season.

Chances that the Republicans can defeat Democrat Barack Obama are exceedingly slim. That's not good news for the national Republican Party, which stands to lose the seat held by GOP Sen. Peter Fitzgerald. But the races that are most critical to rebuilding the Illinois GOP come not this year, but in 2006.

Every state office, from governor to attorney general to comptroller, is up for election in two years. State Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka is the only Republican to hold one of those offices.

The GOP has some considerable young talent, women and men whom few people know because they're toiling in low-profile posts. One of them should be plucked for the Senate race. Not necessarily with the idea of defeating Obama, but with the idea of running a credible race that raises the profile of someone who can run again in 2006.

Unfortunately, some of the most promising young leaders in the state would have to give up their current jobs to run for the Senate this year. That may rule out a Senate race for U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, state Sen. Christine Radogno, state Sen. Dan Rutherford, state Rep. Beth Coulson and state Rep. Chapin Rose, though they are all very impressive.

Other bright Republicans would not have to sacrifice their jobs. That list includes DuPage County Board Chairman Bob Schillerstrom, state Sen. Dan Cronin and former state Rep. Jim Durkin, who ran a credible challenge against Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin in 2002.

There are some very intriguing prospects outside of politics as well.

This is a wake-up call for a party that has not been developing its bench.

The Republicans need to pick a fresh face.

Do it quickly. The Republicans need to start thinking about the future right now.